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## Second Reaction: Ability Over Stigma

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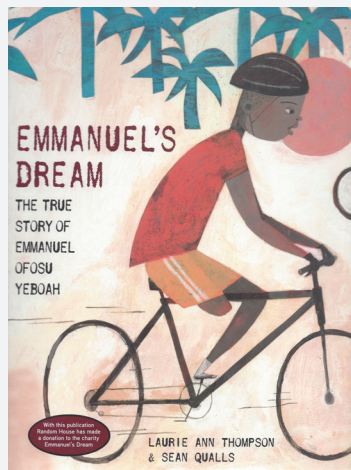
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## Second Reaction: Ability Over Stigma

Thompson, Laurie Ann. *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah*. Illus. Sean Qualls. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2015. Print.

Elena M. Venegas



Upon first glance, *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah* seems to be a book about a young African bicyclist. A closer examination of the cover, however, reveals that the main character, Emmanuel, is miraculously using only one leg to ride his bicycle in this biographical tale.

The reader is immediately introduced to baby Emmanuel, who was born with only one strong leg. Emmanuel's father soon abandons his family after seemingly succumbing to the Ghanaian cultural stigma associated with persons with disabilities. Comfort, Emmanuel's mother, embraces her son; however, she teaches him that he must do things such as fetching water and walking to school on his own. Emmanuel first finds it hard to fit in at school, but he soon makes friends through playing soccer. When his friends begin to ride bicycles, Emmanuel attempts to as well. Initially, Emmanuel fails, but soon he accomplishes this feat. Comfort becomes ill, and Emmanuel sneaks off to the city of Accra in order to find work to support his family. Because of social stigma, it's difficult for Emmanuel to find employment. Eventually, he finds work, but is ostracized one day by a shopkeeper. This incident inspires Emmanuel to ride his bicycle across his homeland of Ghana in order to raise awareness of the ability of the *pozo*, or "the disabled person" (Thompson, unpagged). Emmanuel garners national and international attention as he accomplishes this amazing feat.

*Emmanuel's Dream* is not only an inspiring true story, but it also hits on several real-world issues, the most obvious being the treatment of persons with disabilities in Ghana. Children

can begin to explore issues of prejudice and discrimination through the story. Emmanuel is initially outcast by his schoolmates, finds it difficult to gain employment, and is stereotyped by a shopkeeper. Even young children can discuss how poor treatment made Emmanuel feel as well as what they can do when someone is mistreating another person. *Emmanuel's Dream* can also be a springboard for teaching children about other forms of discrimination based upon race/ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth. For example, teachers can compare the discrimination Emmanuel encountered to that experienced by African Americans in the U.S. prior to and during the Civil Rights Movement.

Many children may also readily identify with Emmanuel. Children from single-parent families or those who had a parent or loved one suffer through an illness and/or pass away can also connect to Emmanuel's story. Low socioeconomic children may identify with the Yeboah family's struggle with poverty since thirteen-year old Emmanuel became the sole provider for them after his mother became ill. *Emmanuel's Dream* can help all children develop empathy as Emmanuel and his family endure poverty and loss. All children can also derive inspiration from Emmanuel because he did not allow his circumstances to hinder him.

I shared this book with my eight-year old niece, Olivia. As I read, I paused to ask her questions such as "How do you think Emmanuel feels?" I also encouraged Olivia to imagine herself as Emmanuel, considering he faced various trials. Olivia enjoyed the story overall, but especially Emmanuel's bicycle ride. She identified Emmanuel as special because everyone cheered for him and understood that he was different from others because he could hop on one leg. In imagining what life must be like for Emmanuel, Olivia remarked how difficult it must be to hop two miles to school and play outside, nevertheless ride 400 miles across Ghana on a bicycle. Olivia picked up on the mistreatment of Emmanuel and stated that persons with a disability should be treated nicely and be able to work. Familial poverty was another theme that Olivia identified by noting the importance of Emmanuel helping his family to survive by sending them his wages.

The central theme of *Emmanuel's Dream* is ability. Though Emmanuel was born with a severely deformed right leg, he refused to accept the social stigma associated with the *pozo* (unpaged). Instead, Emmanuel accomplished something that even persons without disabilities would struggle to achieve. *Emmanuel's Dream* can be used to remind children and adults alike that they are able despite their circumstances, whether that is being a person with a disability, growing up in a single-parent home, encountering illness, or enduring poverty.

I highly recommend this book to parents and educators of elementary-aged children. I would especially encourage teachers to add *Emmanuel's Dream* to their repertoire. *Emmanuel's Dream* is rather unique in featuring a person with a disability without sugar-coating the difficulties Emmanuel encountered. More importantly, Emmanuel's story is one of empowerment. From an early age, Comfort encouraged her son to do for himself. One could assume Comfort's approach led Emmanuel to believe in his abilities, which eventually led to his amazing

accomplishments and advocacy for Ghanaians with disabilities such as working to maintain scholarships for children with disabilities and helping organizations to distribute wheelchairs (Thompson, Author's Note).

### **About the Author**

**Elena M. Venegas** is currently pursuing a PhD in curriculum and teaching at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Venegas teaches an undergraduate course in the department of curriculum and instruction at Baylor University, as well. Prior to becoming a doctoral candidate, Venegas was an elementary school teacher and childcare center director. Venegas's research interests include media literacy and literacy in the twenty-first century.